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Frost, for Jazz Orchestra: Exploring New Conceptual, Harmonic, Formal, and Timbral Approaches to Jazz Composition

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Frost, for Jazz Orchestra: Exploring New Conceptual, Harmonic, Formal, and Timbral Approaches to Jazz Composition

by

Alan Jordi Retamozo

Thesis

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Frost, for Jazz Orchestra: Exploring New Conceptual, Harmonic, Formal, and Timbral Approaches to Jazz Composition

by

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2019

SUPERVISOR: John Mills

The following text is a conceptual and formal analysis of a new jazz orchestra work premiered by the University of Texas Jazz Orchestra on April 13, 2019. The piece, *Frost*, explores new conceptual and structural devices inspired by the works and writings of various 20th century and contemporary composers from both the classical and jazz traditions. By exploring tonal, timbral, and formal concepts not typically associated with jazz writing, I hope the piece, and this document, will provide new possibilities for creative exploration to composers of jazz ensemble works.

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List of Examples

Chapter 1: Conceptualization

Interests, Inspiration

Having spent much of the summer, fall, and winter of 2018 researching and studying diverse compositional practices and techniques, *Frost*, a new work for jazz orchestra, was influenced by a broad range of concepts and theoretical writings.

Composer Manuella Blackburn's article titled, *The Visual Sound-Shapes of Spectromorphology: an illustrative guide to composition*, presents a review of the dimensional, graphic, gestural terminology and imagery that has emerged from attempts by composers and theorists to describe the perceived characteristics of electro-acoustic music.[1] Blackburn goes on to argue that this ever-expanding catalogue of terminology and graphic illustration can provide composers of instrumental music a powerful wellspring of ideas and approaches to writing. Many of the primary melodic/linear ideas in *Frost* were first conceived as gestural shapes either drawn out on manuscript paper, physically conducted, or mimed.

Composers Maria Schneider[2] and Bob Brookmeyer[3] have each described the way their works are deeply informed by the perceived physical sense of weight and movement of sound structures; the way that sounds press, pull, glide, and emerge. For me, this abstract aural sense of momentum and physical weight plays a major role in designing vertical structures. Similarly, composer Christopher Theofanidis has described melodic and rhythmic gestures as having an

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[1] Manuella Blackburn, *The Visual Sound-Shapes of Spectromorphology: an illustrative guide to composition* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[2] Maria Schneider, *Evanescence: Complete Scores* (UE Publishing Musikverlags GmbH, 1998).

[3] Rayburn Wright, *Inside the Score* (Kendor Music, Inc., Delevan, NY, 1982).

essential "brushstroke" quality and he has talked about recognizing and fulfilling the innate momentum and continuity of a line as a physical gesture.[4]

Ex. 1.1 Images from Blackburn "*Sound-Shapes"* article.

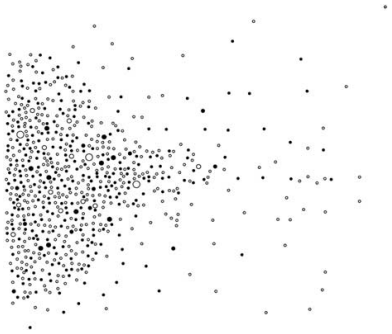


Figure 11. *Dissipation*.

Figure 14. *Multidirectional*.

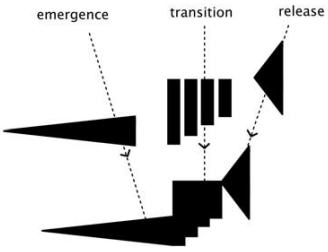


Figure 3. Sound unit – *emergence, transition, release*.

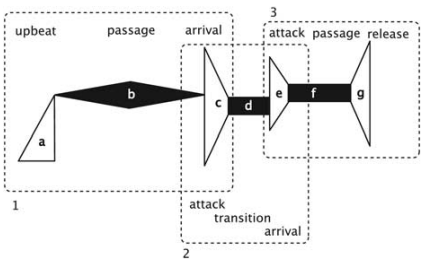
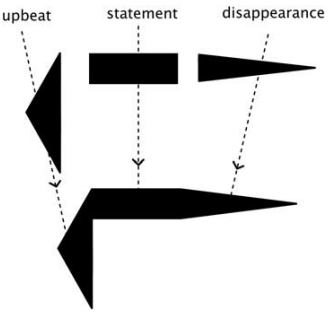


Figure 5. Dual functionality in a *morphological string*.



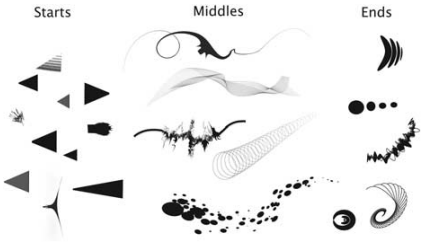


Figure 6. Starts, middles and ends.

[4] Christopher Theofanidis, personal communication, June 2018

Harmonic and linear concepts from Ludmila Ulehla's *Contemporary Harmony: Romanticism through the Twelve-Tone Row*[5], and Vincent Persichetti's *Twentieth Century Harmony*[6], provided starting points for many of the underlying ideas in *Frost*. Those concepts include: polychordal / polytonal writing; interval structures and fluid tonal associations; symmetrical hexatonic structures (melodic and harmonic); twelve-tone scale writing (not to be confused with serialism); the tonal and/or harmonic implications of linear material.

Maria Schneider's works, many of which feature alternative, expanded formal frameworks and extended soloist sections, have been a major influence.[7] Cedric Thorpe Davie's writing in *Musical Structure and Design*[8] has influenced me greatly regarding the conceptualization of larger forms and the critical role of modulation in dramatic forms. Also regarding form, composer John Mill's ideas about the importance of climaxes and arrival points, and the conceptualization of form on many levels (macro to micro) throughout all stages of composition, have greatly influenced my approach.[9]

Aesthetic Proposition and Goals

In writing *Frost*, my principle goals were: to keep a sense of propulsion and continuity, to create a sense of multidimensionality through timbral diversity, and to create effective contrasts in density and pacing.

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[5] Ludmila Ulehla, *Contemporary Harmony: Romanticism through the Twelve-Tone Row* (Advance Music).

[6] Vincent Persichetti, *Twentieth Century Harmony: Creative Aspects and Practice* (W.W. Norton & Company, NY, 1961).

[7] Schneider, *Evanescence: Complete Scores.*

[8] Cedric Thorpe Davie, *Musical Structure and Design* (Dover Publications, Inc., 1966).

[9] Dr. John Mills, personal communication, University of Texas at Austin, 2016-19.

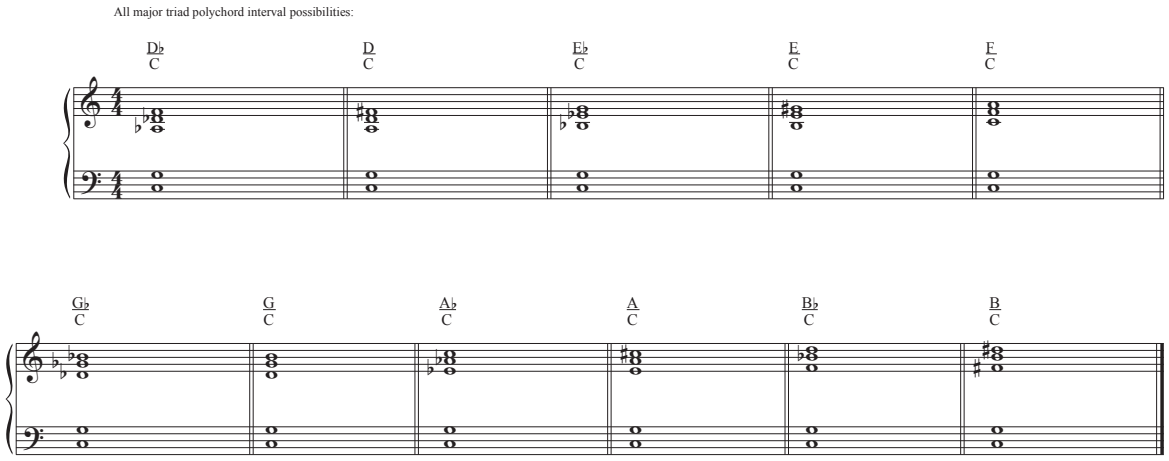
Issues, Tendencies, Challenges

One of the most challenging aspects in writing this piece was the necessity to find or create solutions for fundamental musical elements such as the creation of interplay between tension and release, continuity, cadence, etc., while exploring fundamentally unstable, fluid ideas. By establishing a non-conventional framework of ideas and tonal material, the harmonic and linear devices typically used to mediate musical flow become unavailable, and, in order to maintain a sense of continuity and connection, it becomes necessary to find unique structures and gestures not based on conventional diatonic function. In other words, once a principal texture and set of ideas is presented (in this case, polychordal / polytonal colors and highly chromatic gestures), I could not easily revert to conventional, tonal/diatonic devices or progressions in order to solve the basic problems involved in creating a cohesive musical narrative.

Chapter 2: Primary Ideas and Structures

One of the first things I did when sketching material for *Frost* was to catalogue all major triad polychord combinations from the 11 available intervals above a single base structure and describe the aural characteristics of each resultant polychord (**Ex 2.1**). Finally, after taking notes on the qualities and possible tonal associations of each triad interval pair (**Ex. 2.2**), I chose a few that I felt would be most suitable for incorporation (bold font in **Ex. 2.2**). The following examples are piano reductions of the primary ideas and structures that inform all aspects of the piece.

Ex. 2.1 Polychords



Ex. 2.2 Polychord List and Notes

Major Triad Polychord Notes (Over C)

Db: dissonant, tense. Dom.7 feel, Phrygian / 7susb9 sound.

D: consonant, lydian sound

Eb: dissonant, #9 sound if full triad base. C-7 sound if P5 shell in base.

E: Consonant augmented maj7 sound, symmetrical hexatonic-ish.

F: consonant. Maj7add4 or Csus sound.

F#: Tritone polychord

G: consonant. Maj7add9

Ab: dissonant hex sound. Over P5 shell: 7susb9. Over triad: maj hex polychord sound.

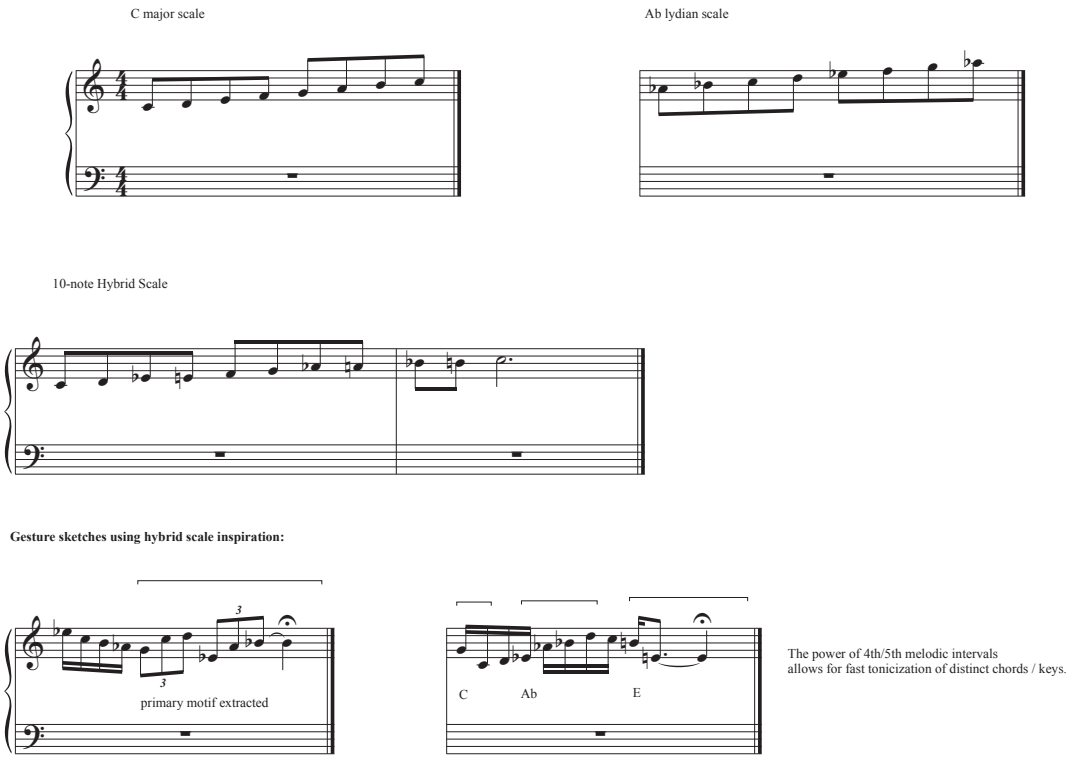
A: consonant. Cmaj7b2, A7#9. Depends on voicing / inversion. A split third chord.

Bb: consonant C7sus or C7add4 sound.

B: dissonant, high tension. 2 maj7 intervals occur.

After selecting the major triad interval pairing of a major sixth, I created a 10-note hybrid scale constructed by combining the chord scales of each triad, one Ionian, the other Lydian (**Ex. 2.3**). The following example also includes some of my initial line gesture sketches, parts of which I extracted to create the primary ideas from which the piece is built.

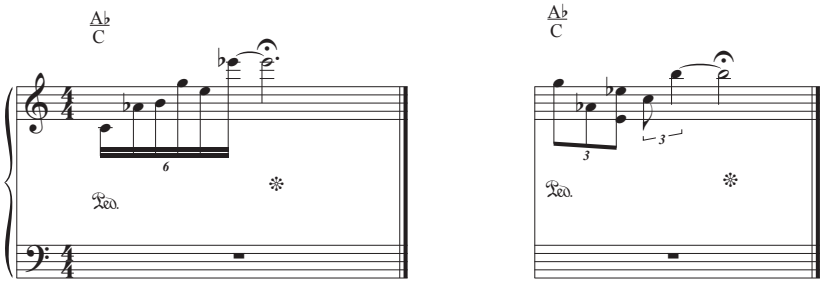
Ex. 2.3 Hybrid Scale and Gesture Sketches



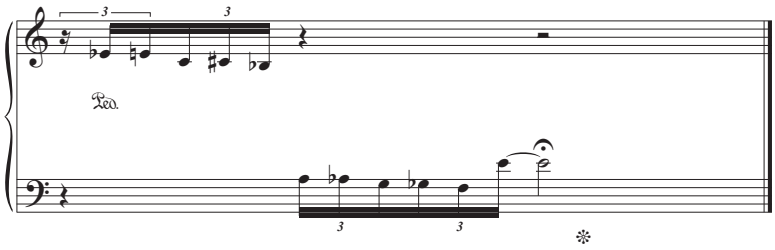
Eventually, I arrived at the following key ideas which inform the piece and appear in all instruments and all ranges at one point or another. Note the clear ascending or descending gestural contour of each idea.

Ex. 2.4 Key Ideas and Structures

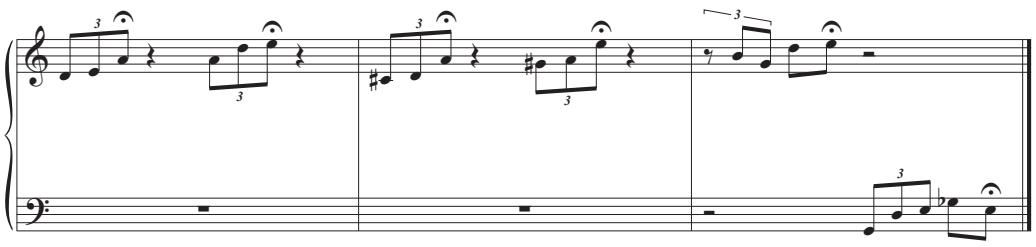
Primary polychord color / tonality.
Major chords a sixth away.



Hybrid Scale Line Gesture



Primary melodic interval motif occuring throughout, in all ranges and instruments.
M2 (sometimes m2) and P5. Various inversions used.



Chapter 3: Form

Form Outline

In this chapter, we will examine the formal construction through macro, mezzo, and micro diagram representations. The overall form is a very long AABA framework (Exposition, Solo, and Recapitulation). The introduction, transition sections, and coda are texturally related and serve as contrasting, connective elements which enable a sense of continuity over the rather long form. The solo section serves as kind of development section, recalling primary exposition ideas and foreshadowing the recapitulation material.

Ex. 3.1 Text-block Form Diagram (next page). Note the highly symmetrical nature of the overall form.

Ex. 3.1 (continued)

Form

General Outline with Rehearsal Marks

INTRO

EXPOSITION
1a - 1b
T1
2a - 2b - 2c - 2d

T2

SOLO SECTION (AABA)
3a - 3b
3c
3d

T3

RECAPITULATION
4a - 4b - 4c - 4d

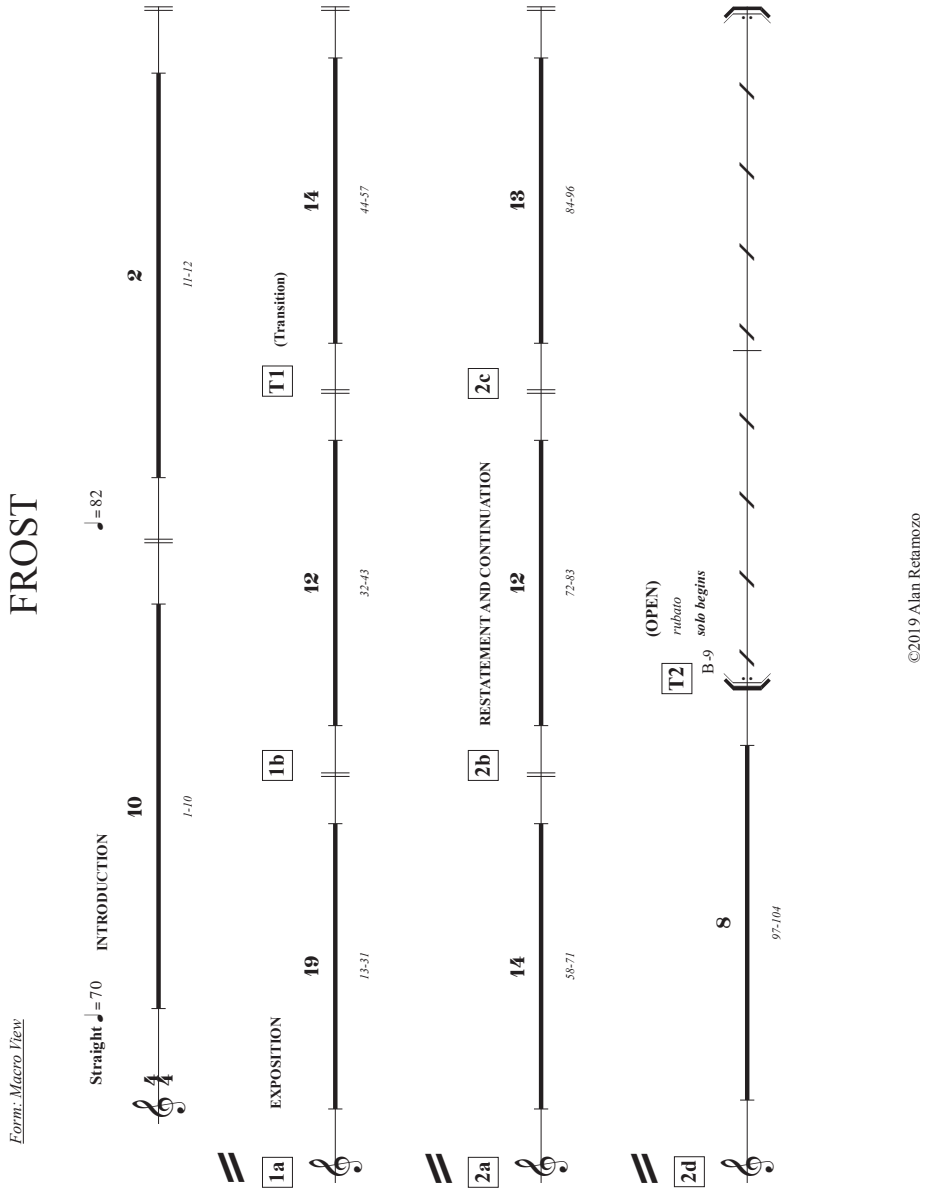
CODA

1

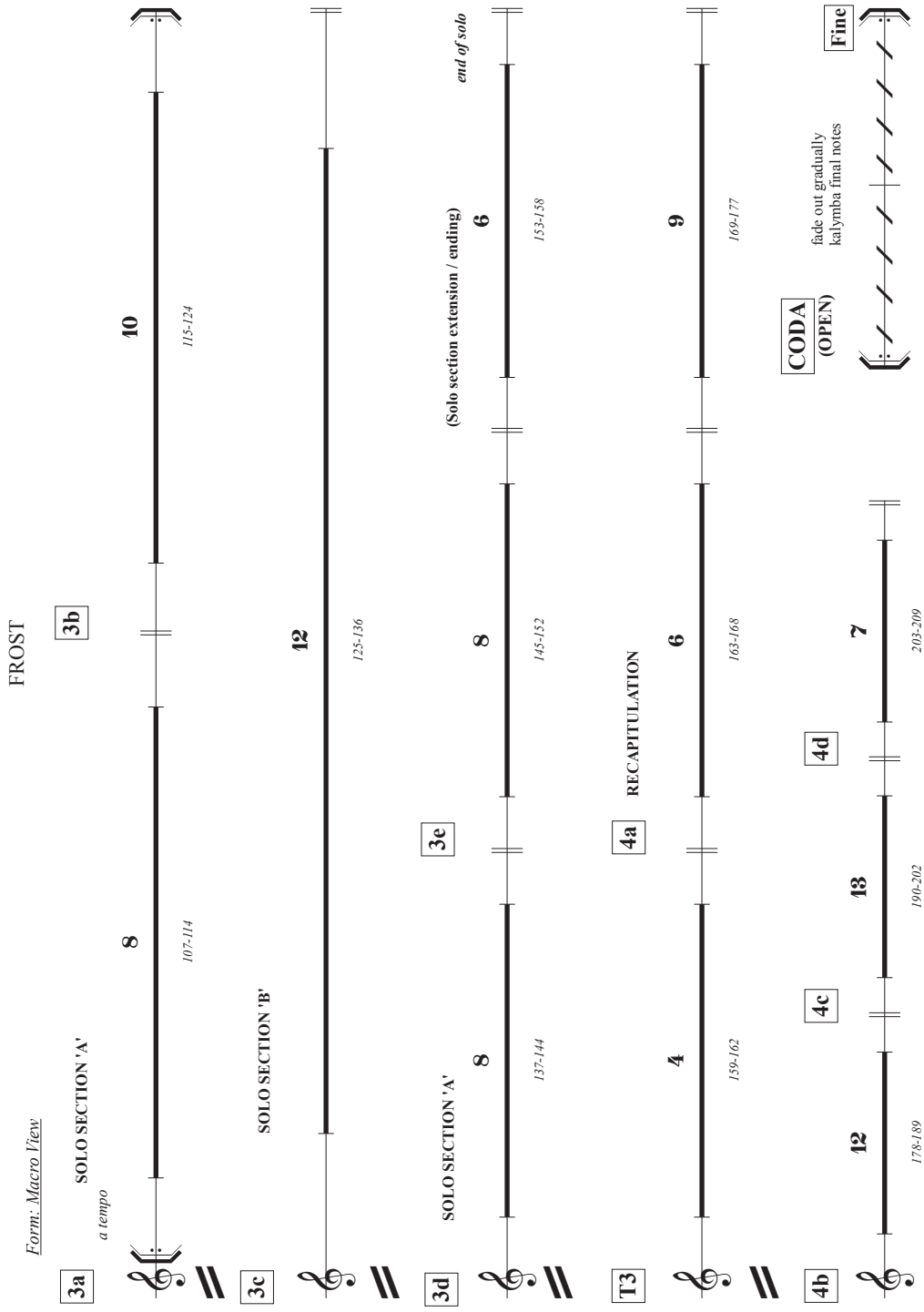
Form: Macro View

The following diagram shows a macro view of the form with the duration of each section in measures. This schematic view reveals the major rehearsal letters and the average length of phrases, giving us a clearer sense of the overall architecture of the exposition, solo, and recapitulation sections.

Ex. 3.2 Macro Form Diagram (continued on next page).



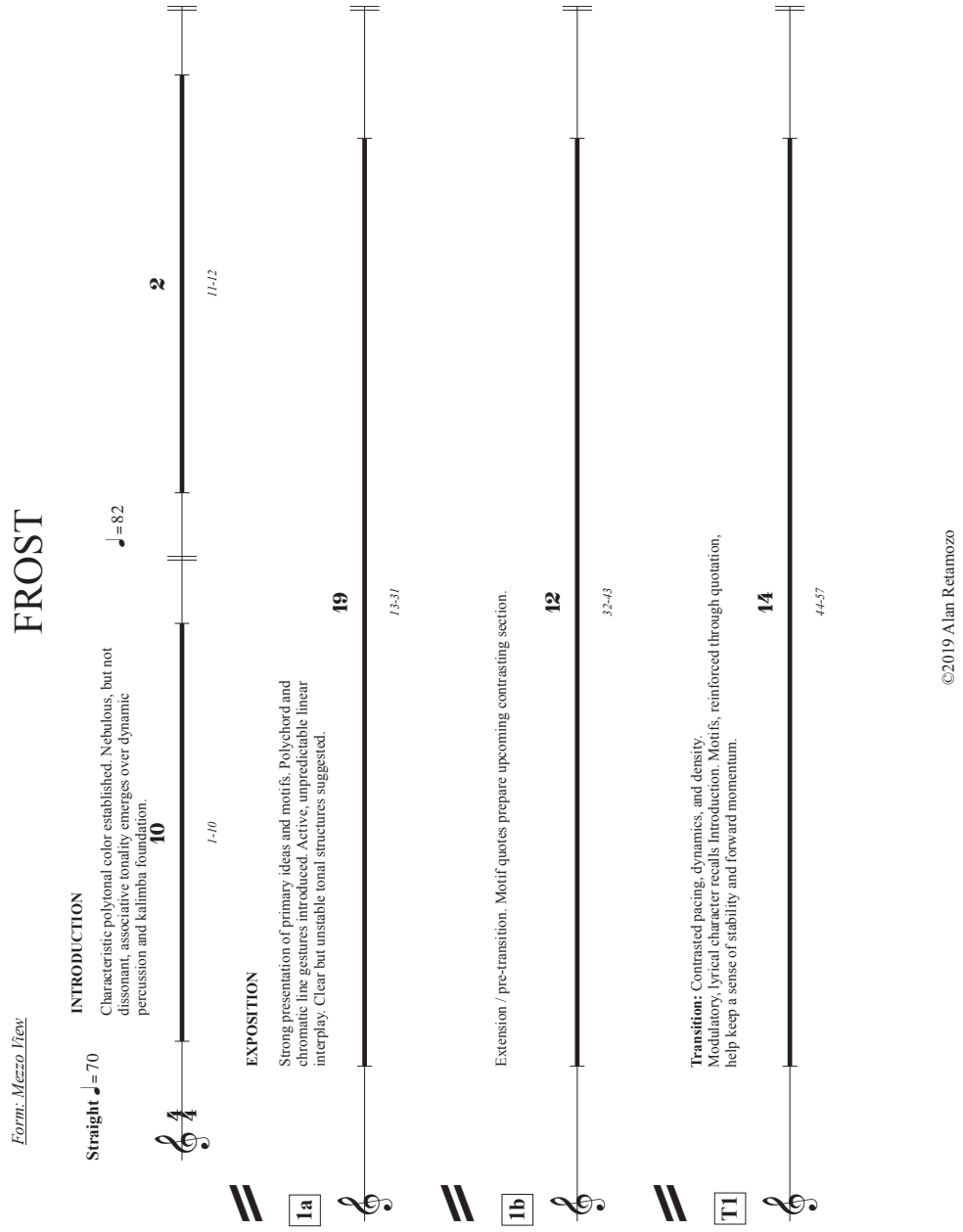
Ex. 3.2 (continued)



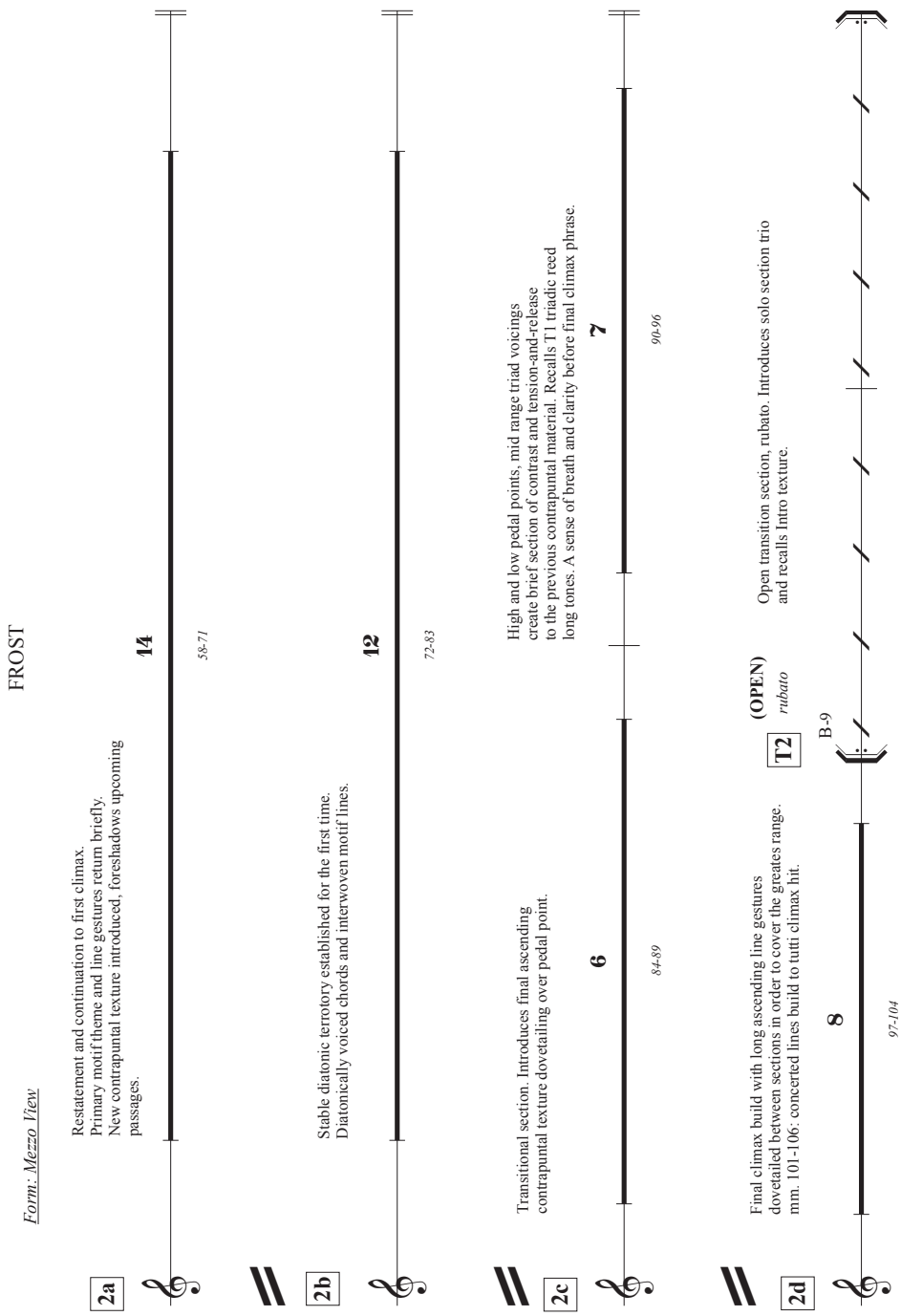
Form: Mezzo View

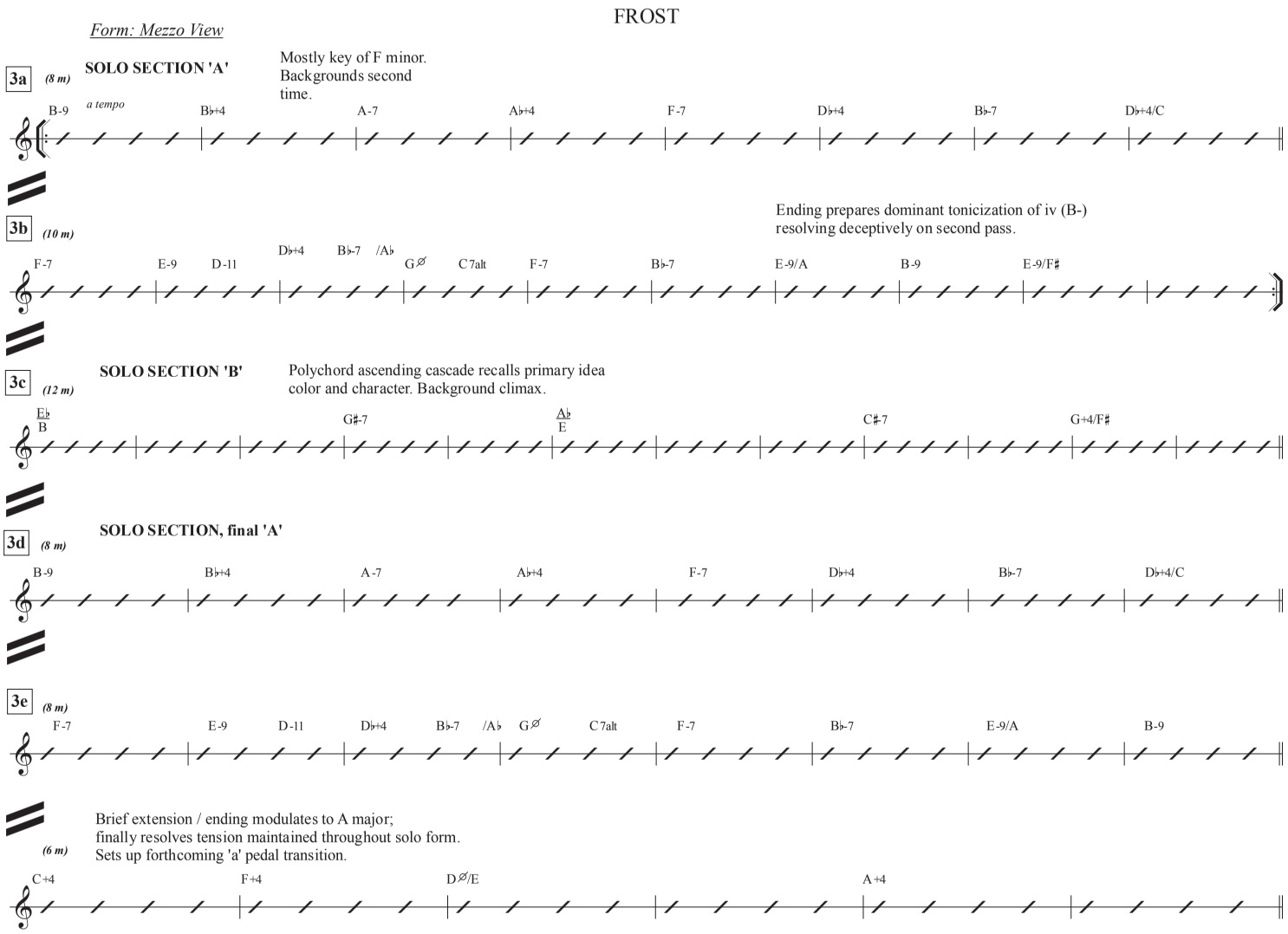
The following mezzo view form diagram similarly displays the sectional architecture of the piece, only this time with relevant notes about key moments and features. Note the semi-transitional sections built into the narrative form, mm. 32-43, mm. 84-89, and mm. 90-96.

Ex. 3.3 Mezzo Form Diagram



Ex. 3.3 (continued)



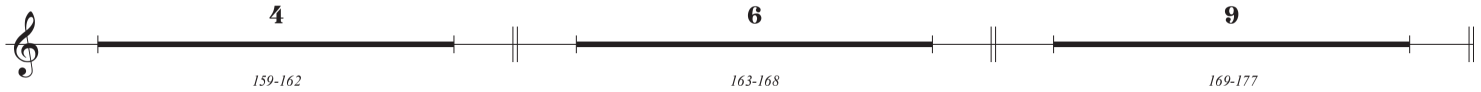

FROST
Form: Mezzo View
3a (8 m)
SOLO SECTION 'A'
Mostly key of F minor.
Backgrounds second
time.
a tempo
B-9
B♭+4
A-7
A♭+4
F-7
D♭+4
B♭-7
D♭+4/C
3b (10 m)
Ending prepares dominant tonicization of iv (B-)
resolving deceptively on second pass.
F-7
E-9
D-11
D♭+4
B♭-7
/A♭
G∅
C7alt
F-7
B♭-7
E-9/A
B-9
E-9/F♯
3c (12 m)
SOLO SECTION 'B'
Polychord ascending cascade recalls primary idea
color and character. Background climax.
E♭
B
G♯-7
A♭
E
C♯-7
G+4/F♯
3d (8 m)
SOLO SECTION, final 'A'
B-9
B♭+4
A-7
A♭+4
F-7
D♭+4
B♭-7
D♭+4/C
3e (8 m)
F-7
E-9
D-11
D♭+4
B♭-7
/A♭
G∅
C7alt
F-7
B♭-7
E-9/A
B-9
(6 m)
Brief extension / ending modulates to A major;
finally resolves tension maintained throughout solo form.
Sets up forthcoming 'a' pedal transition.
C+4
F+4
D∅/E
A+4

Form: Mezzo View

RECAPITULATION

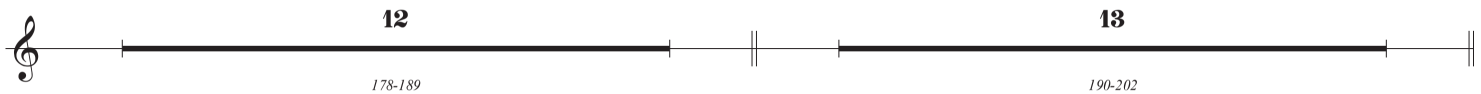
T3 Trombones begin 'a' pedal blur and pointillistic overlap. Creates sense of instability, momentum, and expectation.

4a Primary idea returns, transposed to triads Bb over D.
Ideas and gestures restated / implied in succession.
Homophonic material begins over bass motif lines and motif quotations.



4b Ascending polychord cascades and gestures recall solo section texture.
Followed by root-related relative minor chords (harmonic sequence). The minor chord becomes the upper structure of the next polychord in a new sequence.

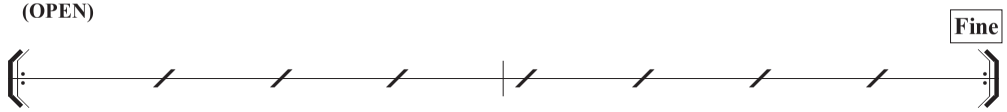
4c Sequence continues, modulating to tonal center of next section.



4d Sequence arrival point A-7/B dominant pedal. Exact restatement of 2c climax build, now up a major 2nd in a new key. Builds to final climax tutti hits.

CODA
(OPEN)

Fragmented, semi-improvised texture, recalls intro and transitions. Primary idea polychord structure distributed across sections and arpeggiated by piano. All fade away at will.

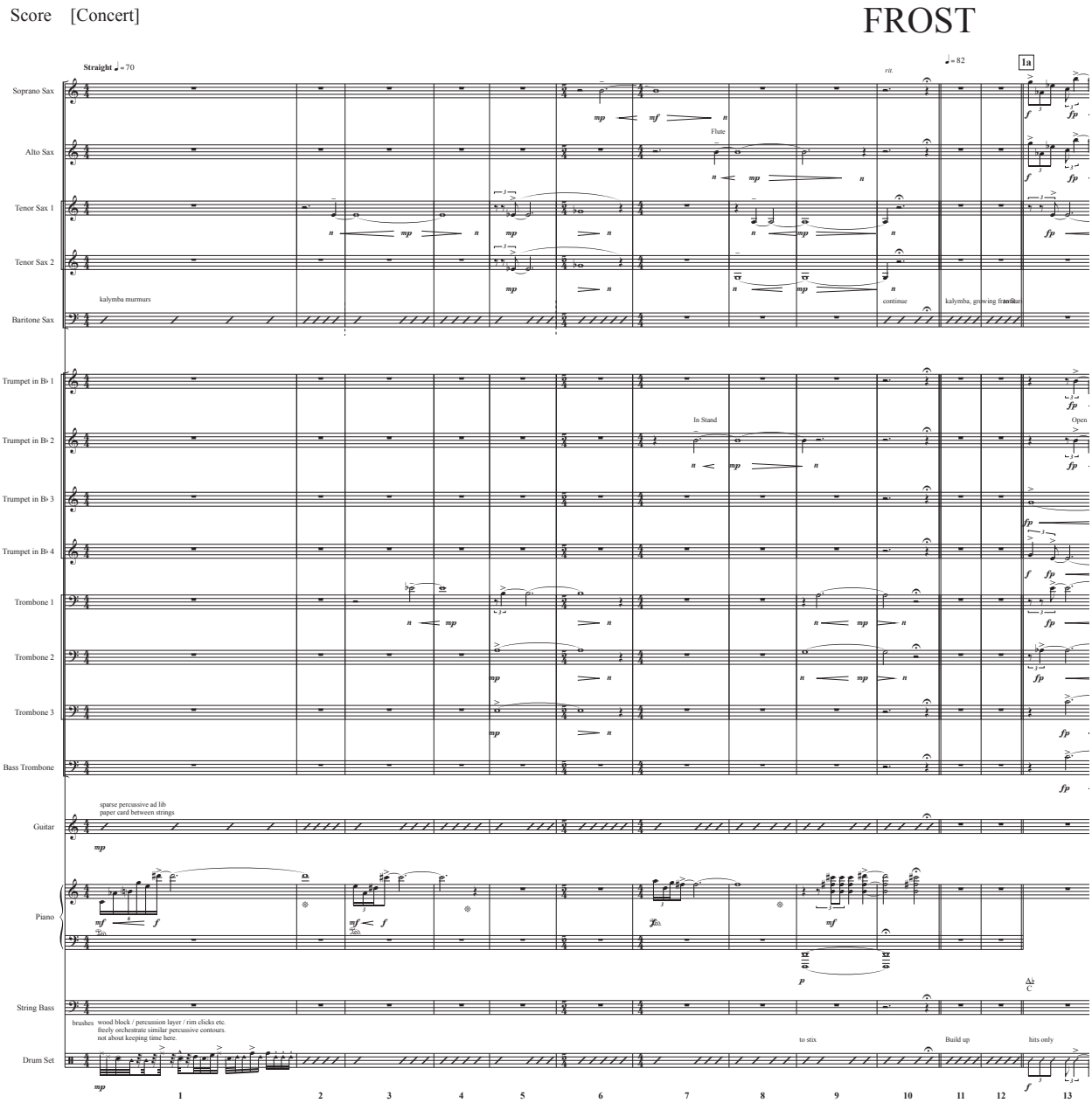


Form: Micro View (Highlights)

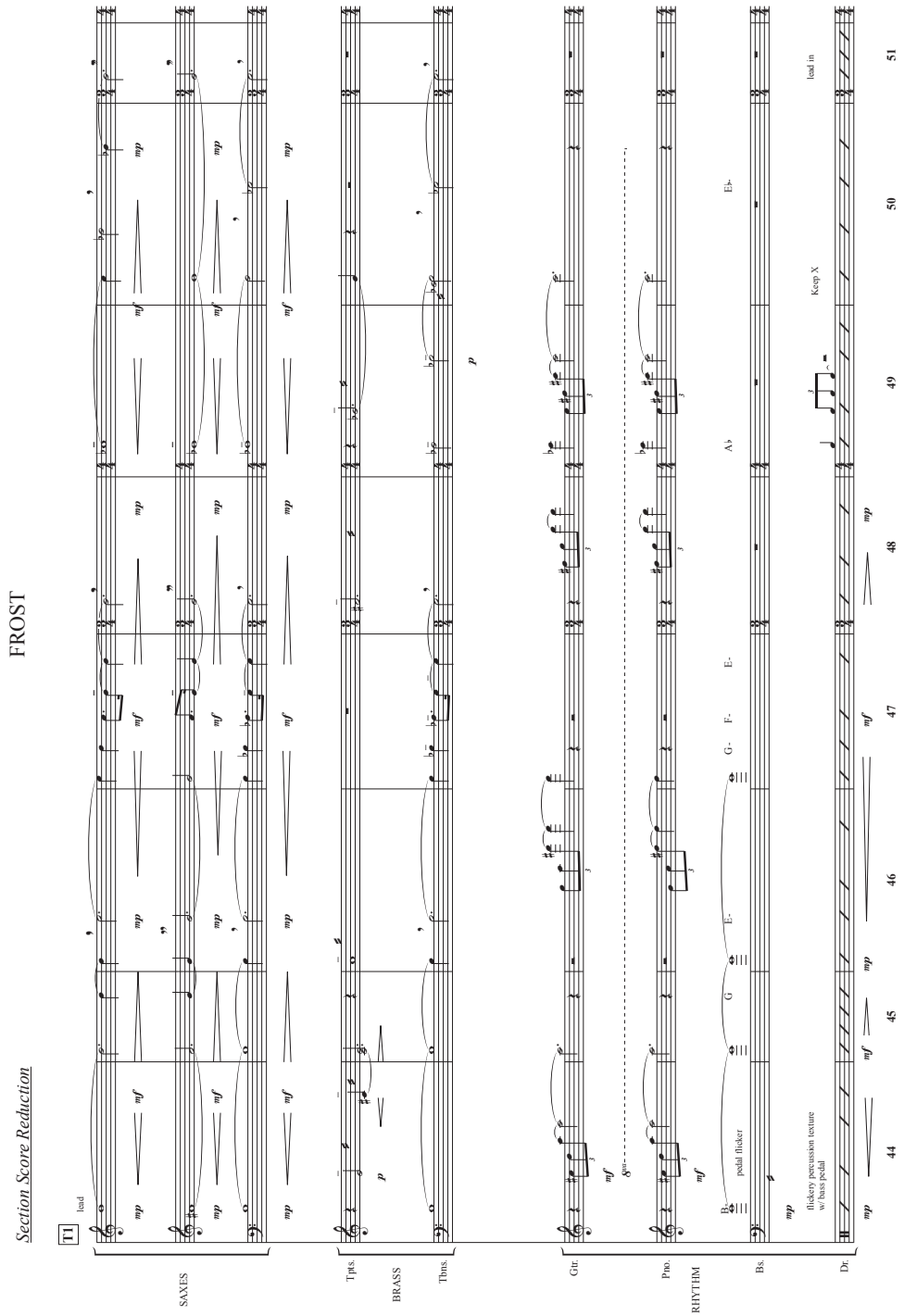
In the following pages, we take a closer look at some key passages, focusing on primary ideas, development of motifs, contrasting passages, and the structure of the solo form.

Analysis begins with the introduction, transition, and coda material (**Ex. 3.4, 3.5, 3.6**) presented with either full or reduced score excerpts. These sections are presented together due to their closely related textural function. This is followed by an excerpt of the first full statement of primary ideas and motifs at rehearsal section 1a (**Ex. 3.7**), and an in-depth analysis of the solo form including harmony and key points of interest (**Ex. 3.8**). Finally, we arrive at excerpts from the recapitulation, with relevant notes. (**Ex. 3.8, 3.9, 3.10**).

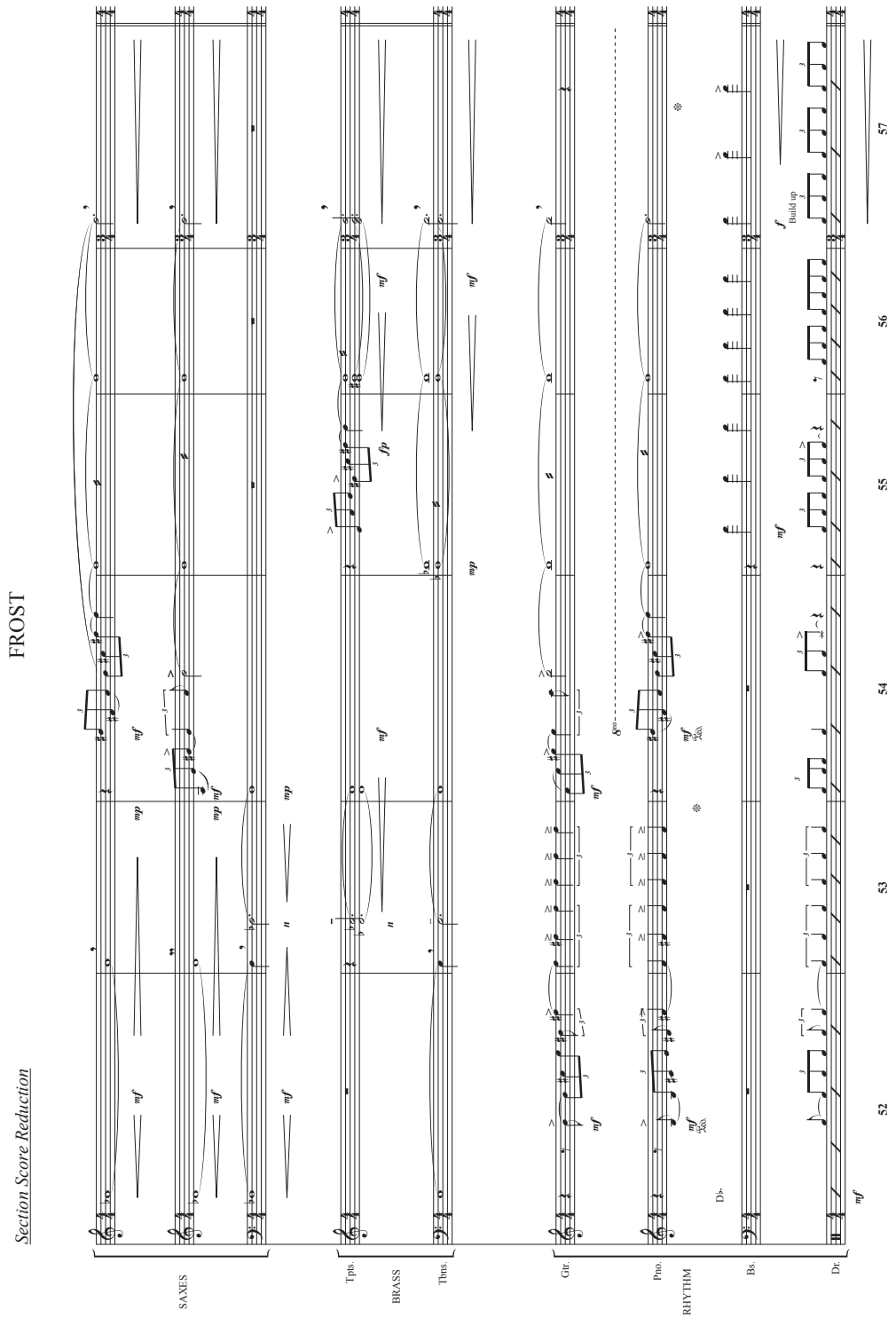
Ex. 3.4 Introduction. Note the introductory piano and drum gestures establishing the polytonal framework. The *niente* brass and reed entrances overlapping create a sense of tonal ambiguity and fluidity and the improvised kalimba accents paired with percussion create a multi-dimensional timbral ambience from the start.



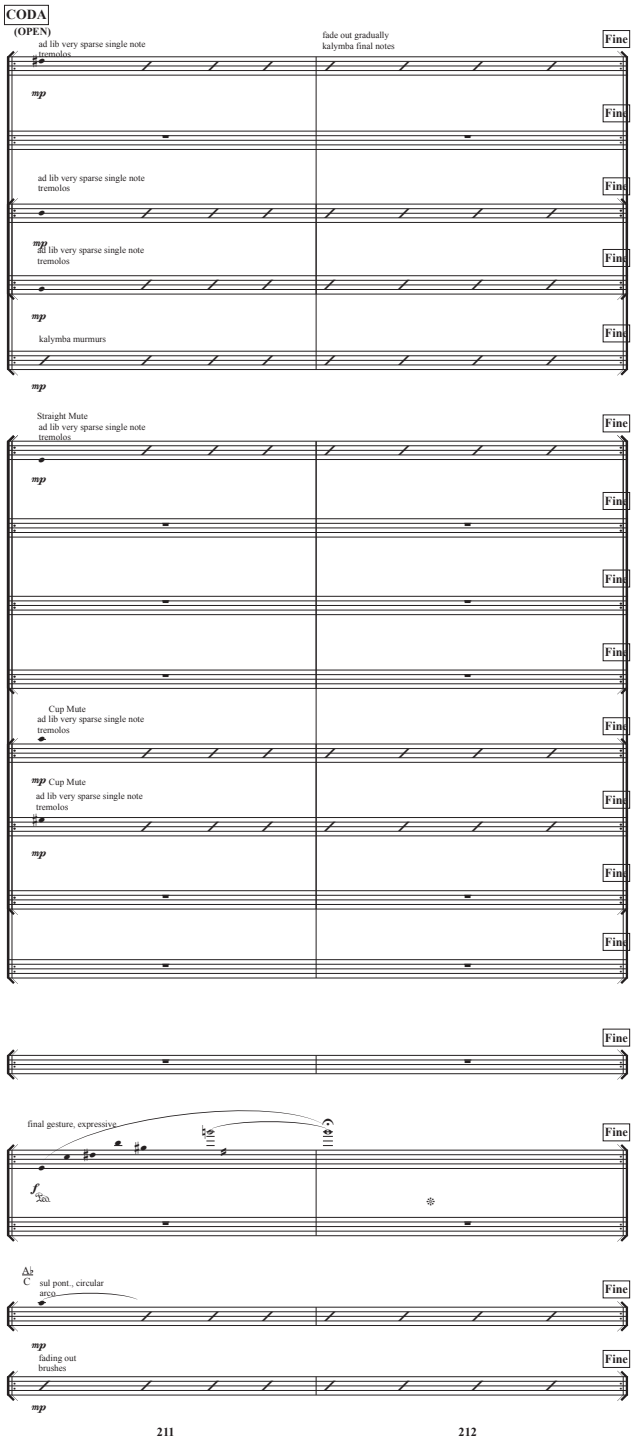
Ex. 3.5 Transition 1. This first major transition section recalls the slower pacing, softer, chorale feeling and timbral dimensionality of the introduction. Note the motivic statements beginning with piano and guitar and growing to include mixed winds as the passage progresses.



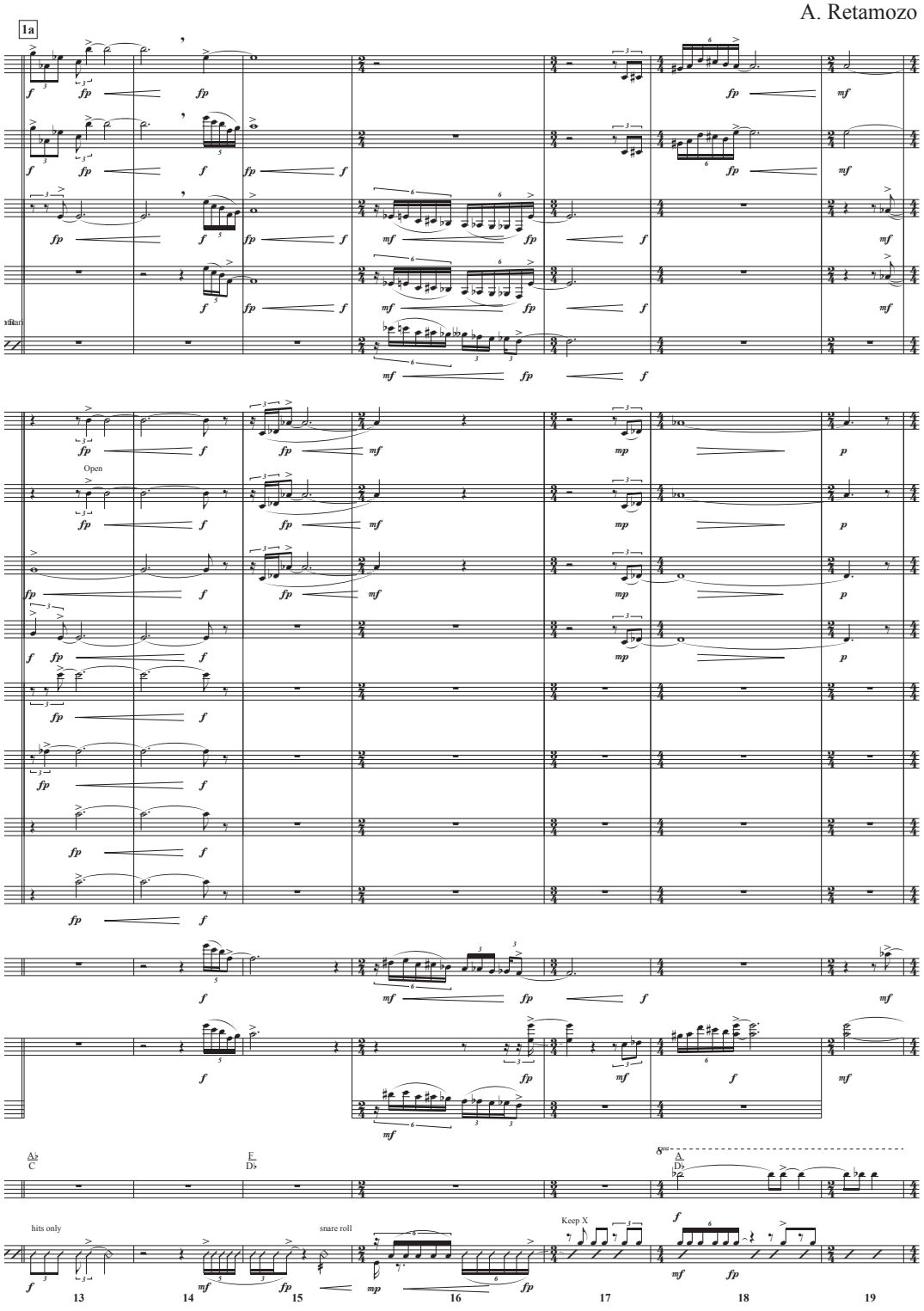
Ex. 3.5 (continued)



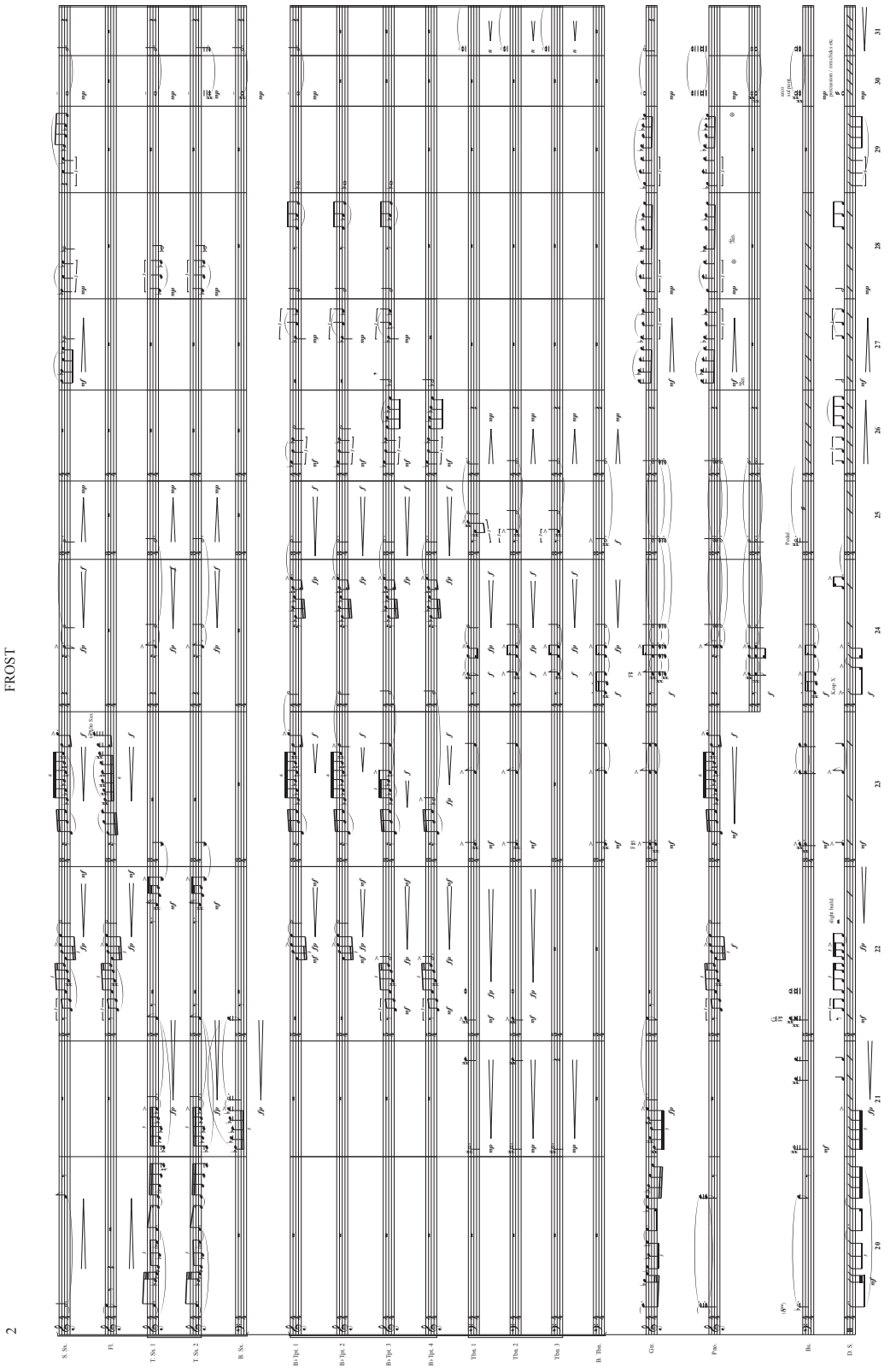
Ex. 3.6 Coda. The coda recalls the introduction and transition settings, only this time using semi-improvisational notation to achieve the desired effect. Note the single-note tremolo group improvisation options and the final primary idea statement by the piano.



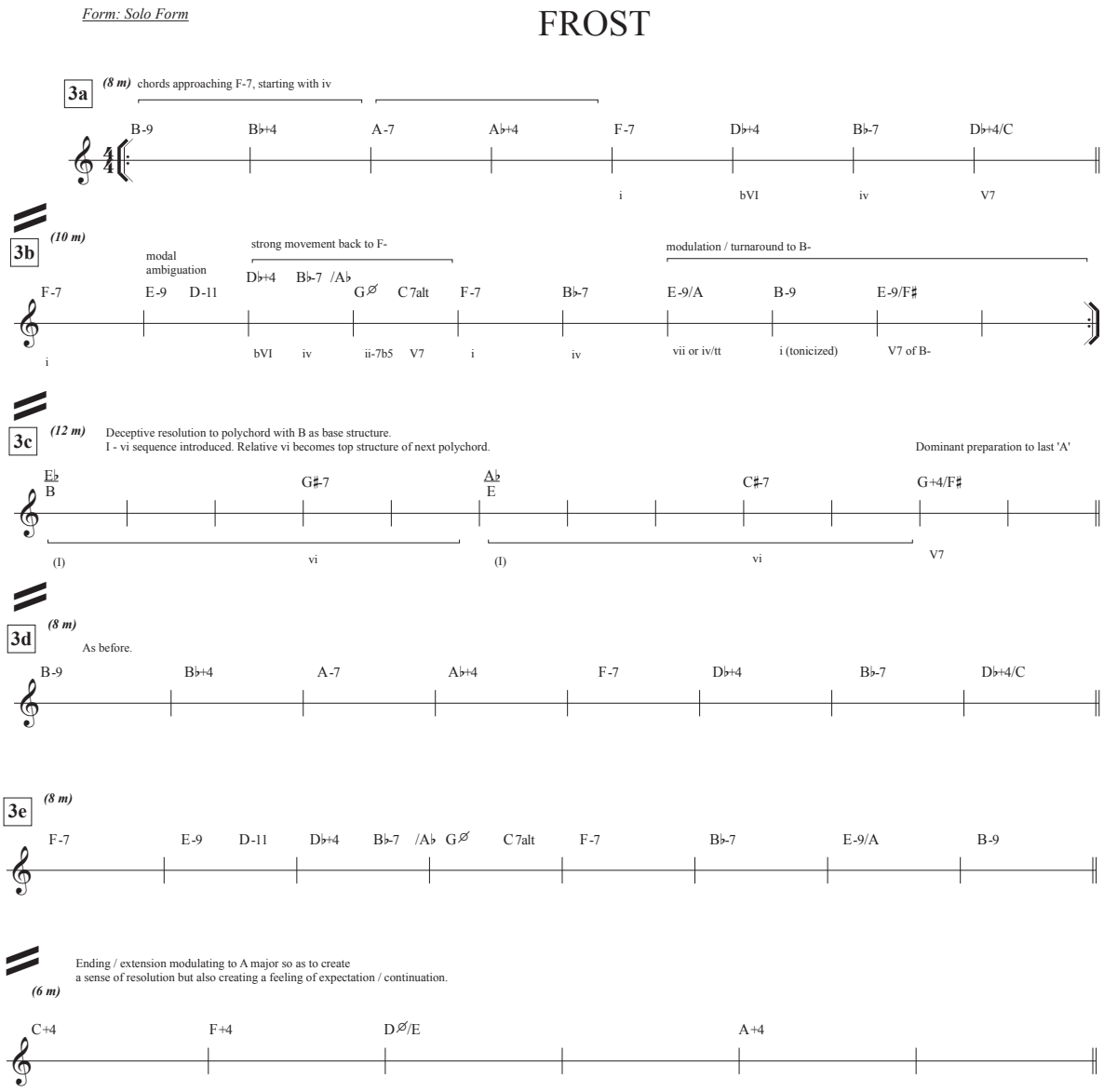
Ex. 3.7 Section 1a. This is the first big ensemble statement of the primary idea. Note the rapid, chromatic gestures dovetailing into new interval structures hinting at possible new tonal centers.



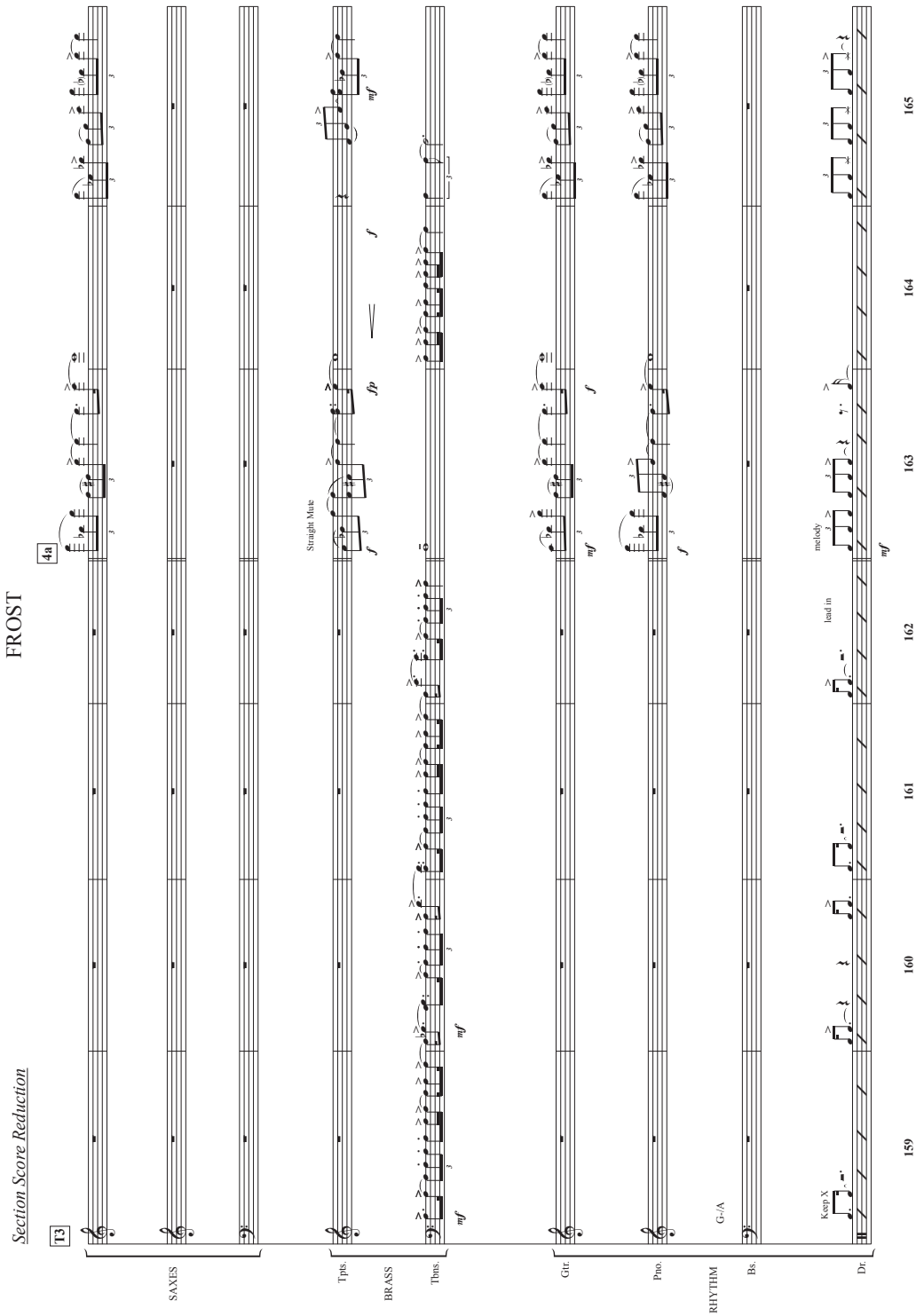
Ex. 3.7 (continued)



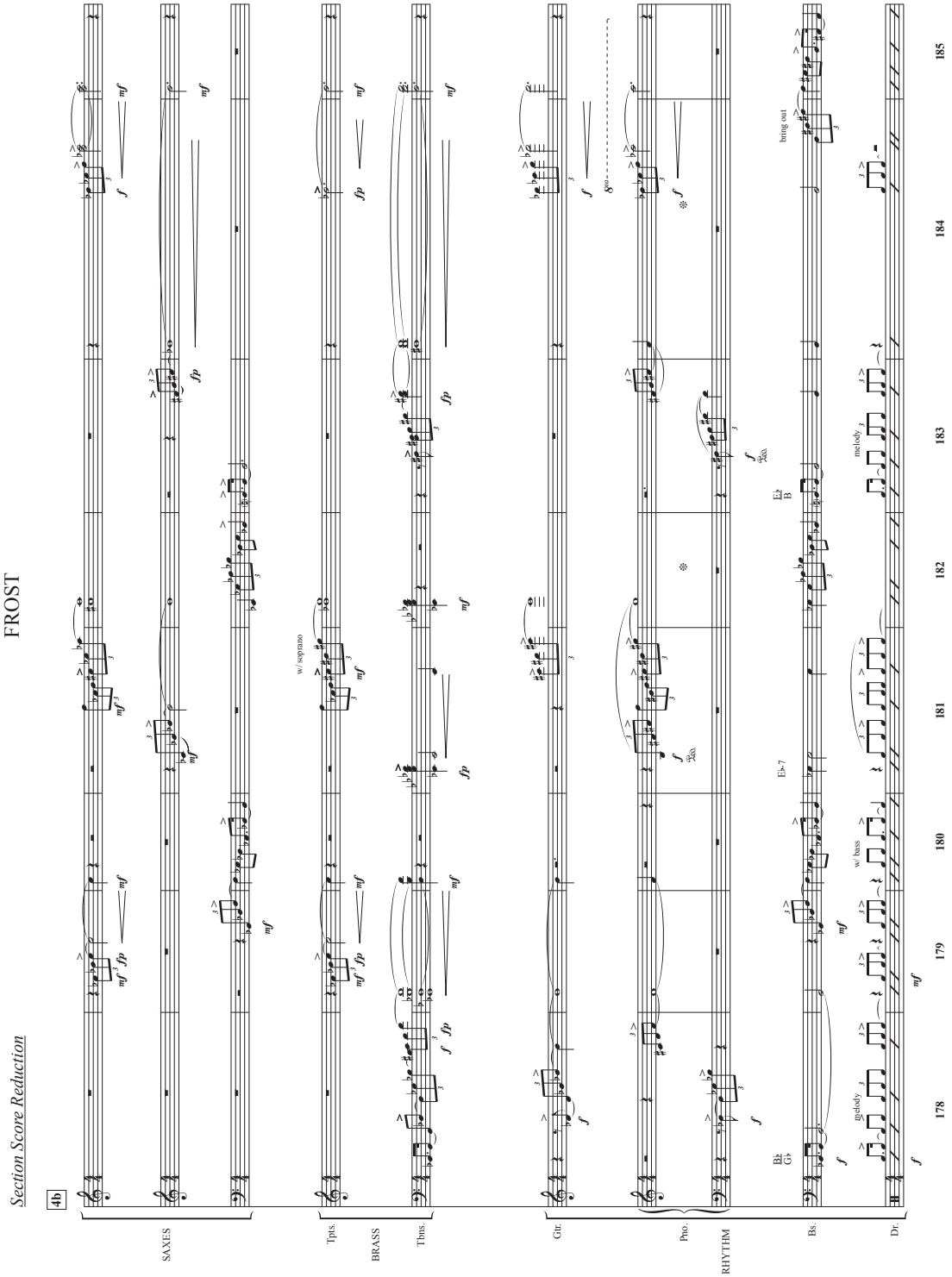
Ex. 3.8 Solo Section Form: Long 70 measure AABA. Primarily in F minor, the A sections begin with a four-measure approach progression leading to F minor. The subsequent four measures firmly reinforce F minor as the tonal center of the phrase. In section 3c, note the Eb over B polychord moving to G# minor, the relative minor of the bottom polychord structure. This introduces a harmonic sequence that features prominently in the recapitulation.



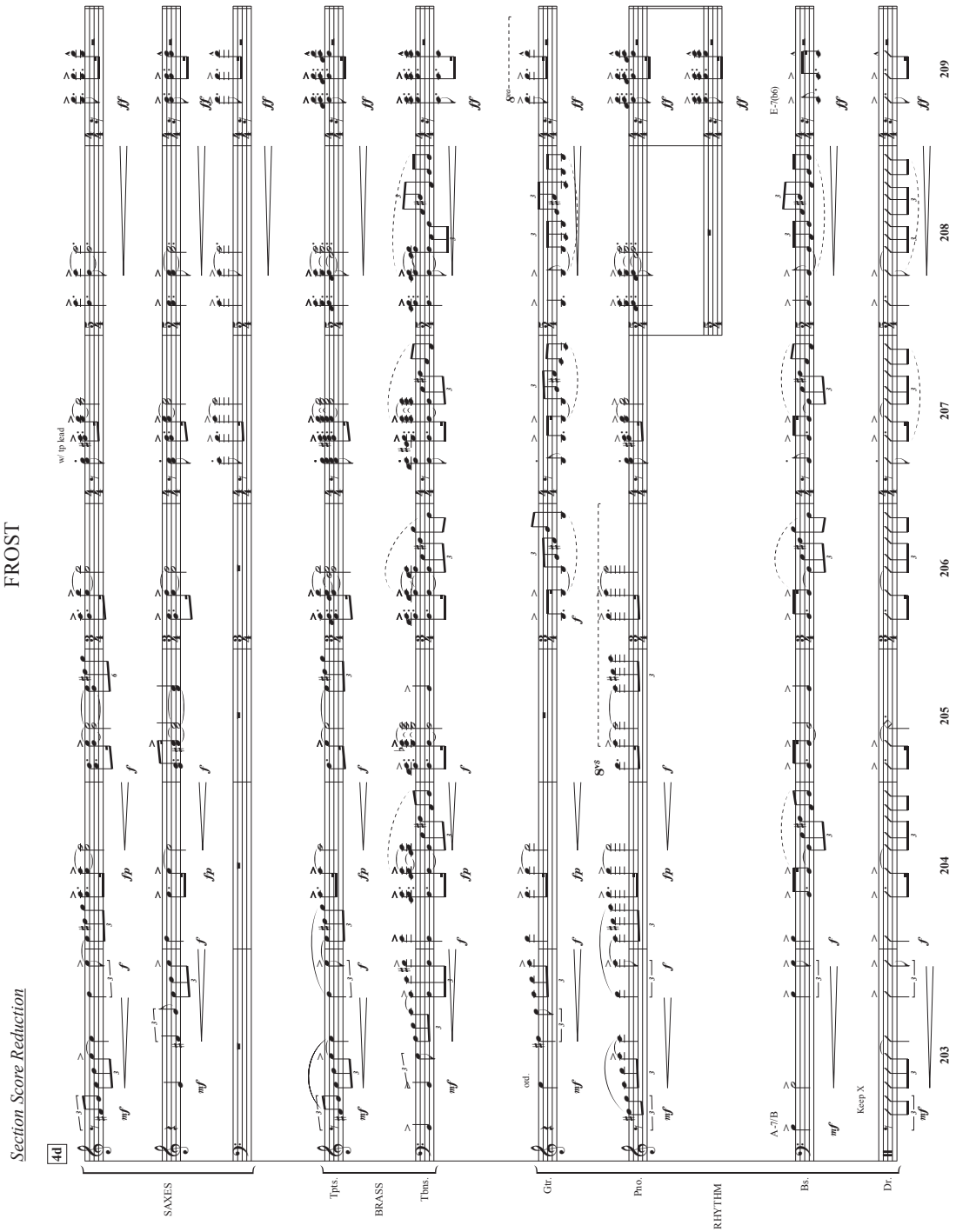
Ex. 3.9 Section 4a, Start of Recapitulation. Note the primary idea from the exposition stated clearly in measure 163 (now in a new key).



Ex. 3.10 Section 4b, Polychordal Sequence. This figure recalls the harmonic sequence established in the solo section (polychord followed by its relative minor). Here it is used as a modulation device over which primary motifs are dovetailed and embellished.



Ex. 3.11 Section 4d, Final Climax Build. Note the gradual coalescing of highly contrapuntal figures into concerted structures.



Chapter 4: Orchestration

One of my primary goals in writing *Frost* was the exploration of new timbral colors and settings for large jazz ensemble. Extended and/or unconventional timbres, cross-section coupling, auxiliary percussion, sectional dovetailing, and the use of the rhythm section as an orchestrational accent are central to the construction and character of this piece. Here are some notes and characteristics I have observed.

Timbre

By utilizing extended techniques and carefully prepared timbral combinations in the introduction and coda, the possibility of a wide range of coloristic and rhythmic textures is established, and the tone of the piece is set. Key timbral features include: the use of kalimba; drums with brushes clicking on rims; group tremolo improvisation with delicate whisper tone; altissimo register and bowed bass; guitar prepared with a card inserted across the strings for non-pitched, percussive effect; Piano and guitar as melodic support and accentuation when paired with winds.

Coupling and Instrumentation

In order to decompress the dynamic range of the ensemble as a whole, I often have the first alto chair play soprano sax exclusively. The resultant decompression that this creates is invaluable as the soprano can easily execute upper register figures while remaining agile and dynamically sensitive. Piano and guitar both pair exceptionally well with brass or reed lines, at once lending clarity through the percussive nature of their attacks and also smoothening and supporting melodic figures as well as providing intonation support for the winds at critical moments).

Rhythm Section

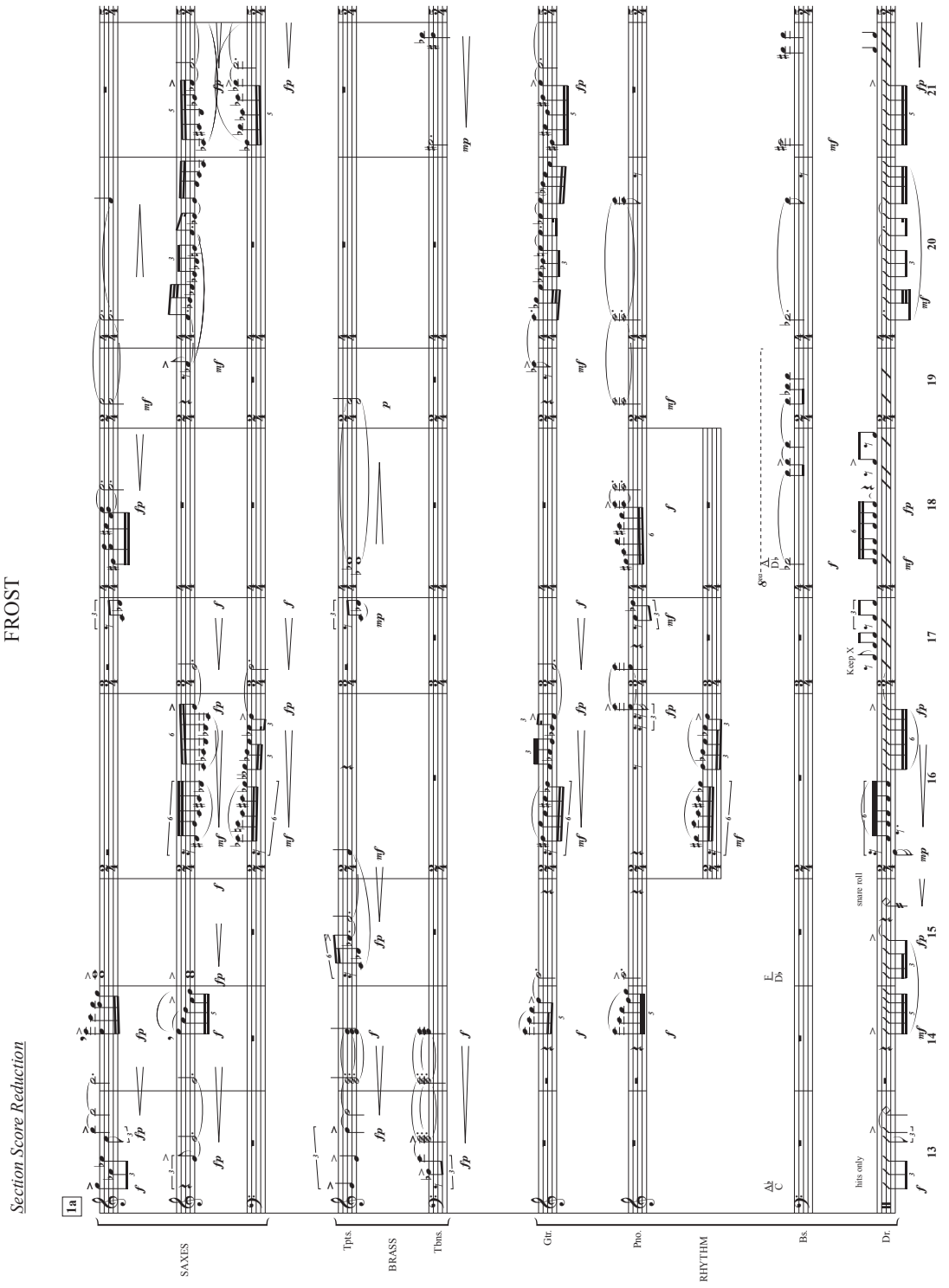
In addition to using the rhythm section instruments as percussive, timbral support for the winds, I try make sure each instrument makes a specific, intentional contribution to the ensemble. Piano and guitar are most often assigned specific melodic or chordal accentuation figures and, in the interest of clarity and careful distribution of weight, almost never play simultaneous vertical structures.

Similarly, I often use the bass as a timbral rather than harmonic-support instrument. Selective medium and high range bass coupling can add a beautiful, percussive, warm accent to mid-range figures. Bowing, including the use of harmonics and circular bowing, allow for a huge range of color accents. In order to support key vertical structures, upper register perfect fifth structures in the bass result in rich overtone accentuation across the ensemble, even if the attack itself is not prominently heard.

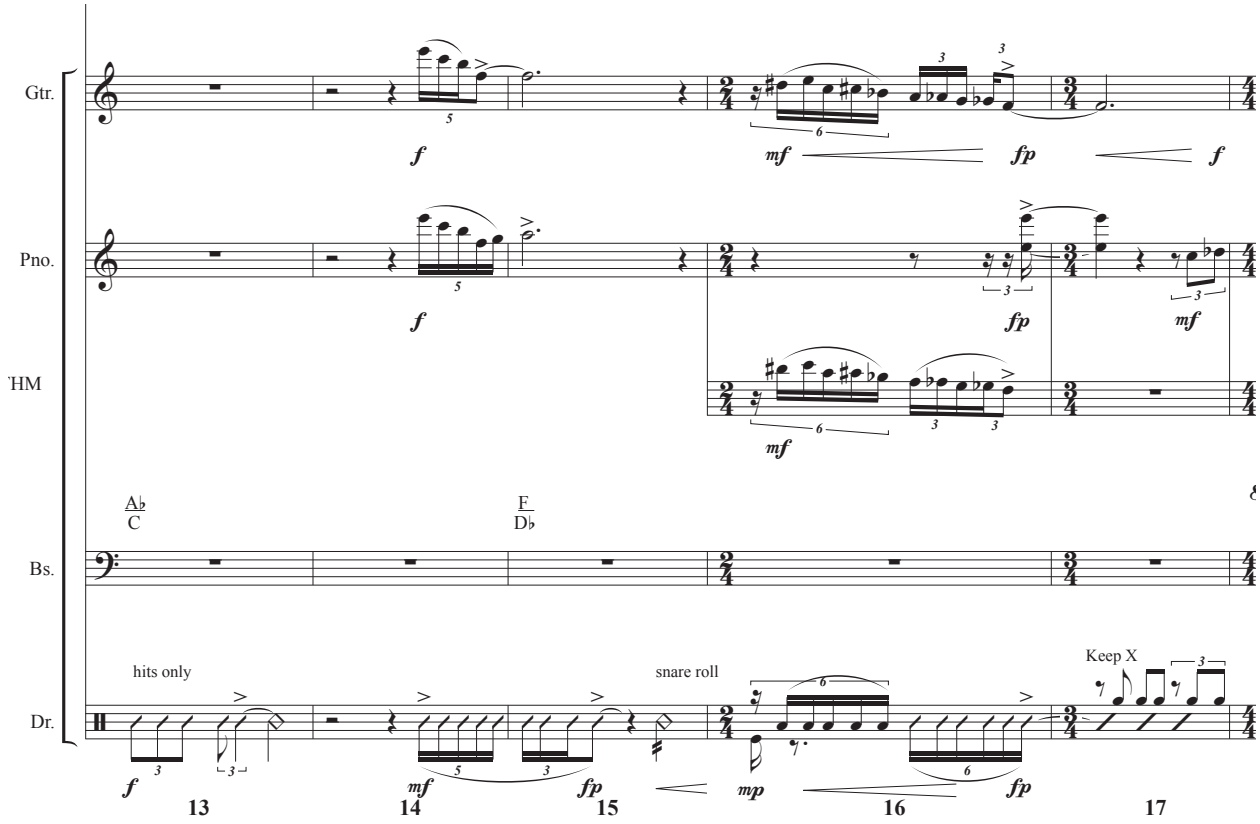
The role of the drum set as orchestrational accent vs. time-keeping instrument poses an interesting code-switch challenge for drummers, but can yield great ensemble results. For example, since much of the exposition material is primarily intricate, orchestrational accents (**Ex. 4.1**) rather than time-keeping with kicks, moments with sparser notation or chord slashes can lead to sudden moments of inactivity or inertia in which the drummer has to code-switch into more of an improvisational time-keeping role. These kinds of moments must be mediated in rehearsal and by the addition of performance notes such as ‘keep momentum’, ’lead in’, or other similar instructions.

The following examples highlight some of these rhythm section orchestration concepts.

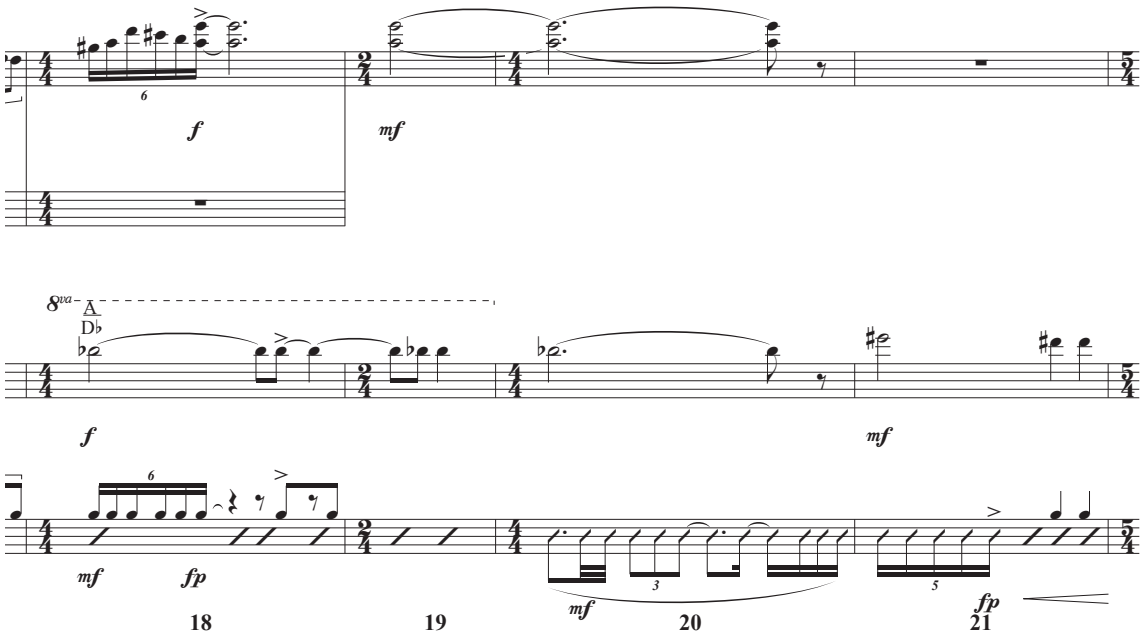
Ex. 4.1 Drum Set Improvisational and Timbral Range. Note the intricate rhythmic figures coupled with the rapid, chromatic reed lines. The lack of kicks in measure 19 poses the risk of an energy drop which must be mediated.



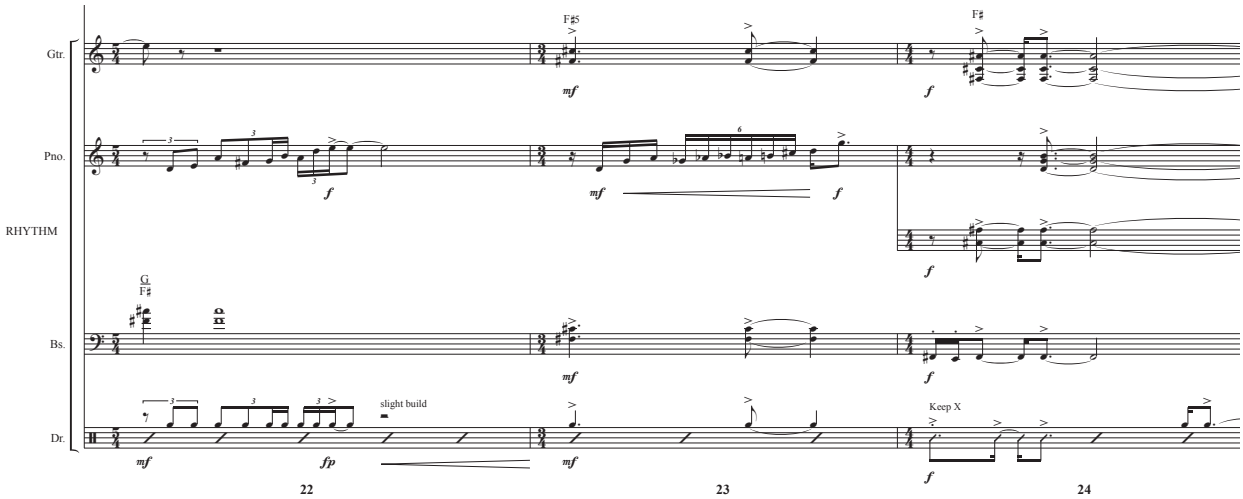
Ex. 4.2 Detail of Drum Notation. A closer look at the rhythm section and drum notation from the previous example.



Ex. 4.3 Bass Altissimo Register Detail. The upper register db adds a beautiful percussive foundation for vertical structures in the winds, piano, and guitar.



Ex 4.4 Bass High Fifths Detail



Chapter 5: Conclusion

I hope that the analysis and notes presented here, while certainly not exhaustive, provide a clearer look at a contemporary jazz orchestra piece featuring modern compositional ideas not commonly seen in large jazz ensemble works. While I am fairly satisfied with the the end results, I do recognize occasional passages which I think could be further refined. Regarding my initial aesthetic proposition and goals, I think that I was reasonably successful in exploring new harmonic concepts, maintaining propulsion and continuity, creating a sense of multidimensionality through timbral diversity, and utilizing contrasts in density and pacing to keep a larger sense of breath and momentum throughout the form.

Some things that could be further refined are: an extended, more dynamic section of soloist-background interaction and climax within the solo form; a smoother transition between polychordal, chromatic, unstable material and conventional, diatonic passages. Some aspects of drum notation and performance notes could have made the drummer's job more intuitive. There are also moments in which I could have included more bass arco accents, harmonics, and extended techniques, especially during the introduction and transition sections.

I believe the material and concepts developed in this piece present many new possibilities for further exploration for composers, directors, and performers alike.

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VITA

Alan Retamozo was born in Mexico City, Mexico in 1985. He studied undergraduate classical guitar performance for three years at Texas A&M International University before transferring to the Bachelor of Music degree in Jazz Composition program at Berklee College of Music in Boston, MA (2007-2010). Upon completion of that degree, he moved to Austin, TX where he works as a freelance guitarist, teacher, and arranger. In 2015 and 2016, he published two chapbooks of poetry, *Pointing at the Air*, and *Dead Light*. Alan's composition and performance experience includes work with: Adam Rudolph and GO Organic Orchestra, Austin New Music Co-op, Revel, New Media Art and Sound Summit, SoundSpace Music Series, and his own composer-led group, Slant Ensemble. In August, 2017, he entered the Graduate School at the University of Texas at Austin where he is a candidate for the degree of Master of Music, Jazz Composition.

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This manuscript was typed by the author.